

<http://blogs.reuters.com/environment/2009/02/12/on-darwin-anniversary-tourist-limits-to-galapagos-antarctica/>

February 12th, 2009

On Darwin anniversary: tourist limits to Galapagos, Antarctica?

Posted by: Alister Doyle

Should the world celebrate the 200th anniversary today of the birth of English naturalist Charles Darwin by working to limit the number of tourists visiting the Galapagos Islands or Antarctica to protect their spectacular wildlife?

Would that help elephant seals like this one above on the Antarctic Peninsula slumber more peacefully? And would it cause less disruption for marine iguanas, below right, on Santa Cruz island in the Galapagos?

The Galapagos in the Pacific Ocean gave Darwin insights into evolution on his famed voyage around the world aboard *The Beagle*. Many species — from mockingbirds to tortoises — differ from those on the South American mainland. For a story, [click here](#).

And Antarctica, which wasn't even discovered when Darwin was born on Feb. 12, 1809, is the world's last big wilderness.

About 39,000 tourists are likely to visit Antarctica this current summer season, down from a record 46,000 a year ago and interrupting a fast-rising trend in the past couple of decades, according to the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators. For a story, [click here](#). Recession has hit bookings of trips that cost thousands of dollars.

IAATO says the numbers are tiny — enough people to fill a football stadium across a continent bigger than the United States.

But a group of environmentalists, the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, wants the numbers capped — it hasn't proposed an exact figure, but says it shouldn't be too far above current levels.

Among nightmare scenarios for Antarctica, first sighted in 1820, penguins might get bird flu. Or new seeds unwittingly brought by tourists might thrive and displace lichens and mosses found nowhere else on earth. A big cruise liner might run aground, spilling oil and coating beaches used by seals.

And the unique wildlife of the Galapagos is similarly under threat from people with both tourism and immigration from the South American mainland. See a BBC report [here](#), for instance, saying that tourism rose to more than 173,000 last year.

The United Nations in 2007 added the Galapagos to its list of world heritage sites in danger.

So should there be caps on visitors? If so, how many?

If not, how do we protect these unique places?